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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001361

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: THEY'RE BACK: REGIME RECONVENES NATIONAL CONVENTION

REF: A. RANGOON 1357

[1](#)B. RANGOON 1352 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)C. RANGOON 380 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)D. 04 RANGOON 637 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: P/E Chief W. Patrick Murphy for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Burmese regime reconvened the third session of its National Convention (NC) on December 5 with diatribes against its foreign and domestic critics and instructions that its 1,000-plus hand-picked delegates toe the party line. The regime clearly views the NC charade as an indefinite process. The GOB claims it will eventually produce a new constitution, as the first step on a "road map to a disciplined democracy," but the process seems to be less a mechanism for a political transition than a means of appeasing the country's ethnic minorities and to meeting the low expectations of some in the international community. The democratic opposition, from the regime's perspective, is not even part of the equation. The regime has taken new steps to ensure that the opposition is neither a source of pressure from outside the Convention nor an irritant from within it. The most recent example was the virtual exile of Shan leaders reported in Ref A. End Summary.

BACK IN SESSION - AGAIN

[1](#)2. (U) On December 5 the Burmese regime reconvened its farcical National Convention (NC), a pre-ordained constitutional "drafting" process that has been on hiatus since recessing in March at the end of an inconclusive six-week session (ref B). Trumpeting a "99.44 percent" attendance rate of NC delegates, SPDC Secretary-1, Lt-Gen Thein Sein, who serves as Chairman of the National Convention Convening Commission, launched the current session at Nyaungnapin Camp, a highly secure training facility for the regime's mass-member USDA, located 20 miles north of Rangoon.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The regime's 1,074 hand-picked delegates, heads of mission from more than a dozen diplomatic and UN missions, and a handful of international journalists attended opening ceremonies of the NC's plenary session. Most Western missions, including ours, declined to attend the event (Note: U.S. defense attaches also declined to attend a similar ceremony on December 6 for the defense attach corps. End Note.). The Russian Ambassador, who attended the opening ceremonies on December 5, said he didn't bother to listen to the proceedings since they were conducted entirely in Burmese and he had already cabled his analysis to Moscow based on the regime's pre-brief for diplomats (ref A). The Vietnamese Ambassador, who also attended, laughed and shook his head when the Charge asked if we should expect a new constitution anytime soon.

[1](#)4. (C) The original National Convention collapsed in 1996, after three years of fits and starts, when Burma's leading democratic opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), pulled out in protest over the regime's manipulation of the process. The SPDC has since excluded democratic opposition parties, including the NLD, from the process. The NC session reconvened this week is the third since the SPDC reconstituted the Convention in late 2003 as the first step on its ill-defined "road map to a disciplined democracy" (ref C).

THOSE PESKY DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENTS

[1](#)5. (U) In his brief opening speech, Gen Thein Sein responded to NLD and international criticism of the exclusive NC process by urging delegates "to be vigilant against the dangers and perpetrations of the internal and external destructive elements (who are) obstructing and harming our National Convention." Thein Sein claimed that the NC work committee had studied constitutions of "some neighboring and western nations" during the recent recess, but insisted that the regime would draft a constitution "best suited for our country." Thein Sein did not specify a timeline for the duration of this NC session, nor a target date for producing a final constitution, but intimated that the process will still take considerable time. (Note: Ref B reported GOB indications that the NC process would not conclude before the end of 2006. End Note.)

DON'T TALK, JUST LISTEN, FOR YOUR 50 CENTS A DAY

16. (U) Minister of Information Brig-Gen Kyaw Hsan offered "clarifications" on NC procedures to delegates and observers on opening day. Kyaw Hsan read a long list of rules and regulations, including requirements that delegates keep all news about the NC "secret;" bow to the State flag whenever entering or leaving the meeting hall; refrain from talking about "the interests of organizations and persons that are not in the framework of the law;" and not repeat "any matter that has already been discussed at this meeting." The Minister, saying that the strict rules are "badly needed for security" and "are not an act of oppression," announced that the regime had decided to increase per diem for delegates from 200 to 500 kyats per day (from 20 cents to 50 cents).

17. (C) Delegates to the NC, many of whom attend unwillingly, approached the current session with a mixture of dread and resignation. Several delegates, speaking to Emboffs in contravention of NC regulations, said that the "discussions" held in Convention workshops are so contrived and manipulated that the delegates have given up trying to make any meaningful contributions, preferring to daydream while regime-designated facilitators mull over pre-drafted constitutional language. Although the increased per diem is a welcome adjustment, delegates say that they cannot avail themselves of "weekend passes" to escape the confines of the NC site because local transportation costs are too costly. On the other hand, say some delegates, they are not required to do much actual work since the ultimate results are predetermined and, therefore, enjoy the temporary vacation from their regular routines at the office or on the farm.

TELL US WHAT WE WANT TO HEAR

18. (U) The regime's mouthpiece newspaper, the New Light of Myanmar, notorious for its strident propaganda, published a poem on December 6 that "celebrated" the gathering of delegates from throughout the country, but unintentionally made it clear that the regime does not expect open debate or dissent at the National Convention. The poem read in part:

"Nyaung-hnapin, Victorious Camp
The National Convention
From all directions to attend
Delegate Brethren
To meet and discuss
To discuss and confer...
One tells what another wants to know
The other tells what one wants."

COMMENT: SAME TASTE, LESS FILLING

19. (C) Little has changed since May 2004 when the regime reconvened the current National Convention. It was clear then, and perhaps even more so now, that without an open, deliberative, and participatory constitutional drafting process, the regime's road map lacks any credibility as a transition to democracy. The SPDC persists with the charade, however, in order to buy time in dealing with the country's ethnic minorities, who demand greater autonomy, and in order to demonstrate to ASEAN members and other foreign "friends" with low expectations that Burma continues (slowly) toward rule of law. Since many had been convinced that this would be the final session with a referendum scheduled in 2006, we will explore how the "friends" will justify this more drawn out process. The democratic opposition, from the regime's perspective, is not even part of the equation. The SPDC's primary objective for the current NC is to maintain complete control, avoiding the "mistakes" it made in 1993 when it allowed the NLD and its allies to influence the process. In this respect, the regime has already succeeded. Ref A reported the virtual exile of Shan leaders, who had participated in earlier NC sessions. Excluded from the proceedings -- with its leaders behind bars and its rank and file members forced underground -- the opposition parties can neither be a source of pressure from outside the Convention nor irritants from within. End Comment.

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